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Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES DONALD LU PER 1.4(B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Yeni Azerbaijan Party leadership's decision to dismiss former Deputy Chair Sirus Tabrizli, coupled with former Minister of Health Ali Insanov's public criticism of the party, has triggered rampant speculation that the ruling party is in crisis. Rather than splintering, the ruling party appears to be consolidating in the run-up to the October 2008 Presidential Election, kicking out members with opinions contrary to the official party line. This move was likely dictated by Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, who exerts strong control over ruling party policies. Mehdiyev and the Yeni Azerbaijan Party leadership appear to be focused on keeping the ruling elite in power, and are likely grooming First Lady and Member of Parliament Mehriban Aliyeva to take over the presidency when her husband's second term is up, provided that the Azerbaijani Constitution is not changed to extend the presidential term. We have no reason to believe that the ruling party will support a platform different than its current manifesto; that is, promoting the policies of the "father of the nation," former President Heydar Aliyev. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) The Yeni Azerbaijan Party's (YAP's) March 27 decision to dismiss former Deputy Chair Sirus Tabrizli, coupled with jailed former Minister of Health Ali Insanov's public criticism of the party during his trial, triggered weeks of rumors and speculation in the press that there was a crisis in the ruling party. A few media outlets speculated that Tabrizli intended to start his own political party, and some linked Tabrizli's dismissal to recent rumors that the President's uncle, abrasive and inflammatory Member of Parliament (MP) Jalal Aliyev also had plans to create a party (to support his own presidential candidacy in 2008), claiming that the two intend to create a party together. In our view, this speculation is far-fetched as the only direct link between Tabrizli and Jalal Aliyev seems to be a 1999 dispute between the two over Aliyev's comments in Parliament, calling opposition politicians "traitors" and "spies." Tabrizli argued that Aliyev's comments were inappropriate coming from a member of the President's family. (NOTE: At the time, Tabrizli was both Minister of Press and Information and an MP. During his ten-year tenure in Parliament, Tabrizli also served as the Chair of Parliament's Human Rights Commission.)

YAP'S EXPLANATION OF TABRIZLI'S DISMISSAL

[1](#)3. (C) In a meeting with Emboffs, ruling YAP Executive Secretary (and de-facto Chair) Ali Ahmadov explained that

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over the course of the last two and a half years, Tabrizli

had drifted away from the ruling party. His ideology no longer matched YAP's, and Ahmadov emphasized the importance of a party centering around unified principles. According to Ahmadov, YAP remains focused on democratic principles, and values the opinions of its members. Ahmadov recounted the party's history, pointing out that Tabrizli had been among its founders; however, he said, over the years Tabrizli somehow became "lost." A political party is a team, Ahmadov said, and actions taken against the team can have negative repercussions for its members.

14. (C) Ahmadov dismissed the idea that Tabrizli's split from YAP would cause, as the press suggested, scores of the party's members to follow him. He said that the ruling party's members did not join because of individual leaders; rather, they joined to carry out the late President Heydar Aliyev's policies, now through the leadership of current President Ilham Aliyev. Ahmadov laughed at the notion that Tabrizli and Jalal Aliyev - or even Aliyev alone - had plans to create a new political party. According to Ahmadov, although Jalal Aliyev's emotional outbursts sometimes lead the press to erroneous conclusions, he has no plans to leave YAP.

15. (C) Noticeably tight-lipped when asked about the then-ongoing trial of former Minister of Health Ali Insanov, Ahmadov said that Insanov's criticism of YAP was baseless. He said that Insanov was simply trying to protect himself; rather than trying to prove his own innocence, Ahmadov said that Insanov "wants others to be guilty as well." Ahmadov concluded that the party "regrets" that a former active YAP member was capable of such crimes, and that he wanted to ensure that individuals like Insanov had no place in the party. (NOTE: In an April 20 verdict, Insanov was found guilty of public corruption and sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment. Throughout his two-month trial, Insanov made

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sensational comments about the ruling party, claiming at one point to have officially joined the opposition, which Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar later publicly refuted.)

TABRIZLI'S ACCOUNT

16. (C) In a separate meeting, Tabrizli told Poloff that he had not been active in the ruling party for two and a half years. Clearly choosing his words carefully, Tabrizli wove a intriguing tale of back-door politics and alliances, describing his role as an informal advisor to former President Heydar Aliyev. Tabrizli explained that former President Albufaz Elchibey had not heeded his advice to remain an oppositionist instead of coming to power, which he believes led to Elchibey's ultimate downfall. Tabrizli said that at that point, he made a conscious decision to support a professional politician in order to bring stability to Azerbaijan. At that time, Tabrizli said, Heydar Aliyev was the only viable choice.

17. (C) Tabrizli waxed rhapsodic about the changes Heydar Aliyev brought to Azerbaijan. According to Tabrizli, Aliyev was able to create stability by negotiating energy contracts, making food readily available to the population, and fixing the problems plaguing Baku's public transportation system. The bread lines common during Azerbaijan's early years of post-Soviet independence were no more. Beyond the social and infrastructural changes, Tabrizli - who served as Aliyev's Minister of Press and Information from 1996 to 2000 - said that Aliyev supported democratic principles. For example, he noted that Aliyev eliminated media censorship in 1998. Further, according to Tabrizli, Aliyev was relatively tolerant to dissent, and would spend hours discussing politics with Tabrizli and mulling his opinions. "Heydar appreciated that I spoke honestly with him," Tabrizli reminisced.

18. (C) According to Tabrizli, things started to change when Ilham Aliyev took over the Presidency in 2003. Tabrizli recalls sharing his concerns with the new President over the deteriorating social situation; he was particularly worried about corruption and the supply and price of utilities. Tabrizli felt that Ilham Aliyev wanted to improve the situation in Azerbaijan but is "surrounded by unhealthy people." Tabrizli complained that the bureaucratically appointed local Executive Commissioners (ExComms), who report directly to Mehdiyev, create unnecessarily difficult conditions for those living in the regions. People like YAP Executive Secretary Ahmadov, he continued, are in denial of the real situation in Azerbaijan, which he believes has discredited the party.

19. (C) Prior to his dismissal, Tabrizli had also become quite critical of the ruling party's internal policies. For example, he said that the situation with former Ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov could have been resolved within the party rather than resorting to their arrest and prosecution on charges of coup-plotting and corruption. But according to Tabrizli, Mehdiyev was behind the decision to arrest the two Ministers and "did not allow" the party to handle it internally. Tabrizli said that there is a widening gap between the "older advisors" and the President. Heydar Aliyev had tried hard to balance their influence, he continued, but the "old gang" has become stronger and now dominates the GOAJ. In addition, Tabrizli said that the President should meet frequently with members of the ruling party, as Heydar used to do.

110. (C) Tabrizli said that his decision to stop playing an active role in the party was a matter of principle. He said that during the time he served as Minister of Press and Information, he had refused to take bribes, which he feels distanced him from those currently in power, among whom he said "corruption is pervasive." Tabrizli said that it has always been important to him to openly express his true opinions, which he conceded is unpopular with many: "It is both my luck and my curse." When the party's leadership decided to dismiss him, Tabrizli said that it did not bother him since he had already become embarrassed to be a YAP member.

111. (C) Tabrizli believes that YAP's decision to dismiss him was based on a desire to publicly pit him against the President. This, however, is not the case, he insisted: "My intentions are pure." Tabrizli dismissed press reports speculating that he intends to create his own political party. "I am tired of betrayal and cheaters," Tabrizli said, noting that former Presidents Ayaz Mutalibov and Albufaz Elchibey, Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar, and Civil Solidarity Party Chair (and MP) Sabir Rustamkhanli had all

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ignored his advice. "Only Heydar listened to me." While he does not purport to have any personal political ambitions, Tabrizli said that he might support Ilham Aliyev's Presidential candidacy in 2008, because he does not believe that a viable opposition candidate will emerge. "The opposition has no fire in its eyes; it cannot ignite others." But in general, he is done with political life. "I have fulfilled my duty, my time," he concluded. "I was the exception to the government." (NOTE: Three days after Poloff's private meeting with Tabrizli, Mehdiyev told the Ambassador that he knew of the meeting, and noted his "surprise" that embassy officials would meet with him under these circumstances - see ref b.)

MEHDIYEV'S CONTROL

112. (C) Mehdiyev appears to have a hand in everything from crafting public policy to directing internal YAP strategies, and is almost certainly responsible for Tabrizli's dismissal from the party. (YAP Executive Secretary Ahmadov is widely

believed to be Mehdiyev's proxy within the ruling party hierarchy.) As Chief of the Presidential Apparatus, Mehdiyev controls the nationwide network of ExComms, many of whom have consistently presented the greatest obstacles to the fair and free conduct of elections, media freedom and freedom of assembly in the regions, and the ability of political parties to function normally. It is not clear if Mehdiyev is currently eyeing any senior GOAJ officials or YAP members for dismissal, but it is commonly thought that he heads one powerful clique within the GOAJ, which includes Minister of Internal Affairs Ramil Usubov, while Minister of Emergency Situations Kemaladdin Heydarov leads the other, which includes Minister of National Security Eldar Mamudov.

2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

¶13. (C) While the ruling party leadership purports to be busy strategizing for the October 2008 Presidential Election, it is clear that the GOAJ does not anticipate any serious challenge to its power. Mehdiyev is likely formulating the GOAJ's - and the ruling party's - election strategy. Journalists, human rights activists, and independent analysts believe that the GOAJ's current media crackdown is a key part of its election strategy, centered on eliminating independent voices before the election. Similarly, they believe that the GOAJ's continued restrictions on freedom of assembly are intended to present obstacles to opposition candidates in the pre-election period. Many international and local observers speculate that the GOAJ will continue to tighten its control over democratic institutions until a few months before the election, then make a few concessions to appease the internationals and suddenly appear democratic.

MEHRIBAN FOR PRESIDENT?

¶14. (C) Conventional wisdom dictates that First Lady (and MP) Mehriban Aliyeva is likely to succeed Ilham Aliyev as Azerbaijan's next President in 2013. She is overwhelmingly popular - perhaps even more so than her husband - and has garnered international attention for her humanitarian and cultural work. However, the idea of extending the presidential term from five years to seven years has been floated several times over the past year, most notably by ruling party MP Mubarez Gurbanli and the so-called "pocket opposition" Ana Veten (Motherland) Party MP Fazail Aghamali. When asked to clarify the ruling party's intentions, YAP Executive Secretary Ahmadov said these calls for Aliyev to extend his term had come from individuals, not the party's leadership. According to the Azerbaijani Constitution, extending the presidential term would require a nationwide referendum, for which no one appears to be making preparations. The GOAJ does not seem to be grooming anyone else to take over the Presidency in the near future. In addition, because of the criminal charges pressed against former Ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov, we believe it is unlikely that any sitting Ministers would make or even contemplate a Presidential candidacy without approval from the highest levels of government.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) We have no reason to believe that the ruling party will splinter, nor that it will support a platform other than its current direction: that is, to promote the policies of the "father of the nation," Heydar Aliyev. While Mehdiyev will continue to play a strong role behind the scenes, we suspect that he prefers to remain there and will not emerge

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as a candidate in any election. Mehriban Aliyeva will likely continue to increase her public visibility in preparation for the 2013 election. We will continue to follow the internal YAP dynamics in the run-up to the 2008 Presidential Election

and report developments, and we will address the other
questions posed in ref a septel.
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